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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000547

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STATE FOR SA/INS

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [FAID](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: BISHOP OF JAFFNA SEES POPULAR
FRUSTRATION RISING

REF: COLOMBO 487

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) In a March 16 meeting with poloff in Colombo, Thomas Savundaranayagam, Catholic Bishop of Jaffna, reported that initial post-tsunami coordination among the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL), the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), NGOs and the Catholic Church ran smoothly. Since then, however, the absence of a joint coordination mechanism between the GSL and the LTTE is impeding swifter delivery of aid. GSL delays in adopting such a mechanism will only reinforce long-standing suspicions of Government corruption and anti-Tamil discrimination among people in the north, the Bishop warned. Agreement on a joint mechanism could also help defuse rising discontent in the north at the stalled peace process, he noted. Recent anti-GSL protests in Jaffna, "partly spontaneous and partly instigated" by the LTTE, point to a growing restiveness he likened to "a dynamite keg." The LTTE, which is reportedly enforcing a 400-meter exclusion zone in some areas, is facing difficulty in building permanent shelter in Mullaitivu because of the paucity of unoccupied GSL land. A long-time Embassy contact, Savundaranayagam generally can be counted on for a moderate, studiously neutral view of events in the north. His skepticism about GSL intentions toward post-tsunami coordination thus offer a sobering view of how northern Tamils likely perceive the Government. End summary.

IMMEDIATE DISASTER RESPONSE:
COORDINATED, EFFECTIVE

¶12. (SBU) On March 16 poloff met with Dr. Thomas Savundaranayagam, Catholic Bishop of Jaffna, in Colombo to discuss post-tsunami aid delivery and recent events in Jaffna. The Bishop estimates that his diocese includes about 75,000 Catholics (down from about 150,000 before the conflict) in Jaffna and Mullaitivu districts. Because Catholics tend to settle in coastal areas in the north (there are 35 churches along the 70-mile coastal belt), members of his diocese were disproportionately affected by the December 26 tsunami, he asserted. In the days immediately following December 26, the local population, the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL), the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), NGOs and the Catholic Church worked quickly and effectively together to set up camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and to distribute relief, he reported. Three joint committees, headed by the GA and the pro-LTTE Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO) were rapidly established to coordinate the distribution of aid in Jaffna and Mullaitivu, he said, although the TRO really made most of the decisions, at least in the early days, about where aid went, the Bishop acknowledged. Initially, he said, the GSL bureaucracy proved ill equipped to deal with the emergency and had to depend upon local residents, the LTTE and NGOs for the disaster response expertise they had gained from surviving for more than 20 years in a conflict zone. (The Bishop added caustically that many local residents already had the benefit of long-term experience as IDPs thanks to the insurgency.) Besides, he noted, GSL representatives were grappling with their own tsunami-imposed limitations at the time. For example, he said, the Mullaitivu Government Agent (GA), whose office was destroyed in the disaster, did not even have a chair or a pencil--even as the GSL was clamoring for her to provide data on the dead and displaced.

CROWN LAND HARD TO COME BY
IN LTTE-CONTROLLED TERRITORY

¶13. (SBU) In Savundaranayagam's view, in the initial emergency response phase coordination generally ran smoothly, despite occasional problems caused by one or the other player--usually the TRO--wanting to claim credit for relief work. (He described the TRO as "quite persistent" in demanding credit.) While the LTTE and its affiliated

apparatus may have dominated the initial emergency response phase in the north, now that the reconstruction phase is beginning, the GAs are playing a more prominent role, according to Savundaranayagam. He reported participating the past week in a foundation-laying ceremony for new permanent houses for tsunami victims in an all-Catholic village in Jaffna. The GSL had provided the land and had committed to building 100 houses. (This is in addition to a commitment from CARITAS to build 2,000 houses in the diocese.) While a sufficient amount of unoccupied GSL land ("Crown land") is available to relocate tsunami victims in Jaffna, the Bishop noted, there is no such land in LTTE-controlled territory in Mullaitivu. Thus, although the LTTE has approached INGOs about providing temporary shelter in the hard-hit district, the permanent housing effort there is not yet off the ground, he reported. In fact, the LTTE had asked the Church to donate some of its land in Mullaitivu, a request the Church is resisting. Complicating planning is the LTTE's insistence on a 400-meter coastal exclusion zone in some areas (100 meters for "a natural conservation zone" and 300 meters for a bund), according to the Bishop. As in the south, uncertainty persists about how strictly enforced the unpopular exclusion zone will be. When asked if, given the relative scarcity of vacant land in Mullaitivu, the LTTE expects to stick to the 400-meter rule, the Bishop replied, "Things are not clear yet."

AGREEMENT ON JOINT MECHANISM:
NOT AUTOMATIC

14. (SBU) The challenges of the reconstruction phase make agreement on a joint GSL/LTTE mechanism to coordinate aid distribution all the more crucial, the Bishop said. For example, in addition to the lack of permanent housing, the Bishop said, the LTTE so far has proven unable to replace the 3,000 Mullaitivu fishing boats damaged or destroyed in the tsunami. GSL suspicions about possible dual usages for the

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vessels may be impeding this effort, he suggested. Moreover, with no coordination mechanism in place, the LTTE and GSL are both obstructing the timely delivery of building supplies and other important materials, as each side imposes its own separate and laborious clearance procedures. In an effort to expedite the movement of foreign NGO workers into LTTE-controlled areas, the Tigers have moved staff from their political wing in LTTE headquarters in Kilinochchi to government-controlled areas in Vavuniya to handle the paperwork, Savundaranayagam reported. In general, as long as the LTTE is notified in advance, there is little to no delay in obtaining the necessary permission, the Bishop said.

POPULAR DISCONTENT IS "DYNAMITE KEG"

15. (C) Most important, however, the joint mechanism could help allay northern suspicions regarding GSL intentions, demonstrate GSL commitment to transparency in aid distribution, and offer hopeful signs of life in a peace process that many northerners view as moribund, Savundaranayagam observed. Recent disturbances in the north point to a deep "undercurrent" of discontentment at the status quo, which, if neglected, could leave the GSL "sitting on a dynamite keg." Besides the violent demonstrations of March 4 (Reftel), on March 11 Jaffna residents threw stones and burned tires after another Sri Lanka Army vehicle hit and injured a second female pedestrian. Efforts by police to quell the angry mob with tear gas failed; the crowd dispersed only after police led a baton charge against the demonstrators. On March 14 a Tamil National Alliance (TNA) MP led a march through the streets of Jaffna to protest the alleged attempted rape of a female civilian by an Army soldier. The protests are "partly spontaneous and partly instigated" by the LTTE, in the cleric's estimation, but nonetheless point to strongly felt and long-standing popular grievances against the GSL. Tamils in the north feel they have nothing to show after three years of a ceasefire, Savundaranayagam cautioned, and have already begun to doubt the sincerity of GSL claims to want to achieve a permanent resolution to the conflict.

16. (C) The joint mechanism could offer a safe, ostensibly apolitical avenue for resumed GSL/LTTE engagement, the Bishop observed, divorced from the harsh, vitriolic rhetoric associated with the Tigers' controversial Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA) proposal. Besides building confidence between the LTTE and the GSL, cooperation on a joint mechanism could also build confidence between the GSL and Tamil civilians who fear tsunami aid will evaporate as quickly--and with as little discernible benefit to them--as the aid promised previously to victims of the conflict, he said. A joint mechanism could help ensure transparency in aid distribution, he noted, an important commodity to a

distrustful and suspicious population. IFIs and multilateral aid organizations could play a key role as well, the Bishop suggested; if the GSL fears the aid will be misused by the LTTE, it could invite the World Bank or the UN to coordinate aid implementation. He indicated that the GSL's continued delay in agreeing to the mechanism raises questions about the Government's commitment to efficient, equitable aid distribution.

COMMENT

17. (C) A long-time Embassy contact, Savundaranayagam can generally be trusted to provide a moderate, studiously neutral view of events in the north. That he is expressing many of the same frustrations cited by card-carrying partisans like the TNA and Peace Secretariat spokesman Puleedevan should be of some concern to the Government. Although no fan of the LTTE, he is also deeply skeptical of GSL intentions regarding the peace process. Northern Tamils we have spoken with, whether "establishment" figures like the Bishop, local NGO workers or academics, describe themselves as doubly victimized--first by the conflict and second by the tsunami. In their collective view, the GSL has done little to redress the wrongs they endured from the conflict. They are understandably suspicious of GSL promises to make things right for them now. Concluding a joint coordination mechanism with the LTTE (which, whether the GSL likes it or not, earned substantial credit locally for its early disaster response), could send a clear signal of GSL commitment to the peace process and to equitable aid distribution.

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